

# Kashmir: If People You Know That Exist, Don't Exist Anymore, Do They Still Exist?

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When I look up at the clouds, I forget where I am. I'm still a child. As I look at the clouds, nothing moves. The world has stopped, it's under a lockdown. But the clouds and the birds are free. Everything around me is static. Frozen. Restricted. Just the clouds move. I'm not there, I'm back here, not in Kashmir where I am supposed to be. Living under a constant psychological state of siege, this is the condition of a Kashmiri state-of-mind worldwide.

In Kashmir, as a child, no school, no outdoor space is safe. Wait, no, not even the home is safe. You can catch bullets, pellets, and shrapnel coming at you anywhere. But you can duck. Kashmiri children have training. We loosen our knees and fall to the ground, and play dead. Breathe slowly. Deeply. If the air is clean, you may stay alive. The lungs will keep pumping oxygen. You'll breathe in, breathe out.

Children have stopped going to schools in Kashmir. As children, our schools were shut down for months in the 1990s too. We were caged in our homes just like our relatives are caged right now. I remember looking at the clouds as a child, admiring their freedom. Today I lay on my back on the grass here in Toronto, looking up at the clouds. Maybe my relatives look at them too, laying on the ground, looking through windows, looking at how freely the clouds move, as the freedom to move outside their homes is restricted. They don't look at their phones, they don't hold phones anymore. The Indian government has implemented a communications blockade policy; the internet and mobile phones don't work. They say the landlines resumed working 16 days after the siege began on Aug 5. If that's true, why can't I reach my relatives?

Even the ones who say they got through, know the landlines aren't safe to use. Everyone is being tapped, recorded, monitored. Everywhere. This is an outcome of decades of voyeuristic surveillance system and culture. You wonder, are your thoughts being monitored? This is what state-imposed indefinite insecurity on besieged Indigenous people produces: complex intergenerational trauma.

On the few landlines that are working, no one will tell you what has actually happened over there. If they did, they wouldn't be safe anymore. Anyone can be picked up anytime by the security forces. Displeasure can be deadly. Dissent can be deadlier. But today, even their silence couldn't protect them.

My relatives may be looking at these clouds like me, looking at the freedom with which they move. I wonder if they envy the clouds, like I did as a child. The clouds have freedoms which fleets them. I wonder how they're doing. Today, this is how I connect with them, by looking at the clouds.

Here in Toronto, my phone works. Does yours? Who did you message or call last? I just spoke to an elder on the phone here in Toronto. She asked me how my family was doing now back home. I told her nothing has changed. I said we are extremely grief stricken, in a state of panic, and desperate for our loved ones' safety. Sounding surprised at my response, she tells me, "I heard on the news a few weeks ago that everything is back to normal in Kashmir now."

A little Kashmiri boy came back from Kashmir to Toronto a few weeks ago. He tells me, his eyes and throat started to burn on one of the days since the Aug 5 siege. It was when he was with his family at home during day time. When he complained to an elder, they said it's normal. They just closed all the windows.

At night, the boy couldn't breathe. This time, it was the tear gas canisters being thrown at homes. They remember the military has so many weapons to choose from. He panicked. The boy is told to go to sleep, at least it's not bullets and just tear gas.. That night, they kept breathing, they managed to stay alive.

His mother tells me, they were grateful that night, no one rounded up the little boy and took him away to an army camp. He didn't disappear. But over 13,000 others have, without a paper trail. Other little Kashmiri children keep getting picked up and disappearing. They don't return to their mothers. To grandmothers. To fathers and grandfathers. To siblings. To the loved ones who have been awaiting their return. To relatives who are inconsolable.

This is normal.

The Indian state and media tells the world, things are normal in Kashmir. The misrepresentation is normal. They are, in effect, saying that Kashmiri lives deserve a type of normal that chokes their breath and burns their eyes and lungs. Kashmiris have become subhuman to Indian state and media. They are being forcefully commanded to accept that they do not deserve clean air, fundamental human rights, Indigenous rights, civil liberties and dignity.

India has argued the changes are for the Kashmiri people's own security and good, for their development. Consent is irrelevant. But our land is like our body. Would you let someone take your body, or your land without your consent? Would you let someone develop you forcibly? Into something else, other than what you determine it to be? Colonial power relations have patterns that look similar across history and time, where sovereign Indigenous rights are transgressed. They tell you, it's for your own good, when it's for their good. They tell you it's for your security, when it's for securing their interests.

I look up at the sky. Here I am living as a free person. I can exercise the rights of mobility to go wherever I need to, access health care, medicine. I can use the internet or phone as needed, get postal mail to communicate and interact with the world. I do not face the threat of being arbitrarily detained, harassed, assaulted, tortured, disappeared, raped, pellet gun blinded, mutilated, killed, forced to eat dirt when I scream when tortured. I determine for myself what I will or won't do, where I will or won't be, with whom I will stay or won't stay. The former freedoms and rights are denied to my relatives in Kashmir.

Here we are. I am free. You are free. Maybe you're not. Maybe you're a Kashmiri who has to go back to Kashmir shortly. And if you've spoken out against India's actions in Kashmir, perhaps some reprisals are already planned for you. A special treatment. A treatment different than the international human rights norms for humans worldwide. Different than humans. An inhumane treatment.

India's Home Minister Amit Shah has said that there have been no reported deaths in Kashmir since the siege. If a person dies because they are suffocated by the tear gas fumes, but an ambulance couldn't be called due to a communications blockade, and a death certificate is denied to the deceased's family, will the person still count as dead? With the communications blockade and lockdown in effect, how many couldn't get food or medicine and perished? We don't know.

For the besieged Kashmiris, justice just hasn't been accessible. It hasn't been accessible to the raped in Kunan and Poshpora, to thousands of mass pellet gun blinded or maimed, to thousands in mass unmarked graves, to the thousands tortured, the 10,000 disappeared, the 100,000 killed, or the hundreds of thousands dispossessed and displaced. No justice.

This is how it just is, we're told. This is normal.

If people you know that exist, don't exist anymore because they are made invisible or taken off the grid, do they still exist? Such are brain tricks. Except this is not any trick, it is a manufactured social condition.

What does it mean for the most densely populated 'democracy' to suspend international rights norms and operate with impunity. Should Kashmiris continue to live in a social condition where fundamental rights and freedoms are only for the imagination or dreams

For now, I hold on. I hold strong. I remember. Our love is so deep deep, it keeps keeps, me going. I speak because my relatives can't. I'll keep speaking till they can. Till they're out of danger. Till they're safe. I look up at the clouds. I know they're looking at them too. We are connected. We will always remain so.

***By Binish Ahmed***

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